

PD WEEKLY, VOL. 1, ISS. 4



"Two Cottages" by Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn) (Dutch, Leiden 1606–1669 Amsterdam) via The Metropolitan Museum of Art is licensed under CC0 1.0

**GUY DE MAUPASSANT
MAXWELL BODENHEIM
MARY E. WILKINS
WILLIAM MORRISON**

The provincialism of small-town life in France and New England is put on display in stories by Maupassant and Wilkins – the former a coal-black social satire, the latter a family drama with a supernatural aspect. The bold poetry of Bodenheimer, from a 1920 volume of his verse, echoes the macho maturity of the Frenchman's approach. This week's issue ends with a bit of 1955 sci-fi romantic whimsy from Morrison. The audio portion of this week's offering more or less an experiment on it's own.
Matt Pierard, Editor.

THE CHRISTENING

from: The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Maupassant Original Short Stories (180), Complete*, by Guy de Maupassant

"Well doctor, a little brandy?"

"With pleasure."

The old ship's surgeon, holding out his glass, watched it as it slowly filled with the golden liquid. Then, holding it in front of his eyes, he let the light from the lamp stream through it, smelled it, tasted a few drops and smacked his lips with relish. Then he said:

"Ah! the charming poison! Or rather the seductive murderer, the delightful destroyer of peoples!

"You people do not know it the way I do. You may have read that admirable book entitled *L'Assommoir*, but you have not, as I have, seen alcohol exterminate a whole tribe of savages, a little kingdom of negroes--alcohol calmly unloaded by the barrel by red-bearded English seamen.

"Right near here, in a little village in Brittany near Pont-l'Abbe, I once witnessed a strange and terrible tragedy caused by alcohol. I was spending my vacation in a little country house left me by my father. You know this flat coast where the wind whistles day and night, where one sees, standing or prone, these giant rocks which in the olden times were regarded as guardians, and which still retain something majestic and imposing about them. I always expect to see them come to life and start to walk across the country with the slow and ponderous tread of giants, or to unfold enormous granite wings and fly toward the paradise of the Druids.

"Everywhere is the sea, always ready on the slightest provocation to rise in its anger and shake its foamy mane at those bold enough to brave its wrath.

"And the men who travel on this terrible sea, which, with one motion of its green back, can overturn and swallow up their frail barks--they go out in the little boats, day and night, hardy, weary and drunk. They are often drunk. They have a saying which says: 'When the bottle is full you see the reef, but when it is empty you see it no more.'

"Go into one of their huts; you will never find the father there. If you ask the woman what has become of her husband, she will stretch her arms out over the dark ocean which rumbles and roars along the coast. He remained, there one night, when he had had too much to drink; so did her

oldest son. She has four more big, strong, fair-haired boys. Soon it will be their time.

"As I said, I was living in a little house near Pont-l'Abbe. I was there alone with my servant, an old sailor, and with a native family which took care of the grounds in my absence. It consisted of three persons, two sisters and a man, who had married one of them, and who attended to the garden.

"A short time before Christmas my gardener's wife presented him with a boy. The husband asked me to stand as god-father. I could hardly deny the request, and so he borrowed ten francs from me for the cost of the christening, as he said.

"The second day of January was chosen as the date of the ceremony. For a week the earth had been covered by an enormous white carpet of snow, which made this flat, low country seem vast and limitless. The ocean appeared to be black in contrast with this white plain; one could see it rolling, raging and tossing its waves as though wishing to annihilate its pale neighbor, which appeared to be dead, it was so calm, quiet and cold.

"At nine o'clock the father, Kerandec, came to my door with his sister-in-law, the big Kermagan, and the nurse, who carried the infant wrapped up in a blanket. We started for the church. The weather was so cold that it seemed to dry up the skin and crack it open. I was thinking of the poor little creature who was being carried on ahead of us, and I said to myself that this Breton race must surely be of iron, if their children were able, as soon as they were born, to stand such an outing.

"We came to the church, but the door was closed; the priest was late.

"Then the nurse sat down on one of the steps and began to undress the child. At first I thought there must have been some slight accident, but I saw that they were leaving the poor little fellow naked completely naked, in the icy air. Furious at such imprudence, I protested:

"'Why, you are crazy! You will kill the child!'

"The woman answered quietly: 'Oh, no, sir; he must wait naked before the Lord.'

"The father and the aunt looked on undisturbed. It was the custom. If it were not adhered to misfortune was sure to attend the little one.

"I scolded, threatened and pleaded. I used force to try to cover the frail creature. All was in vain. The nurse ran away from me through the snow, and the body of the little one turned purple. I was about to leave these brutes when I saw the priest coming across the country, followed.

by the sexton and a young boy. I ran towards him and gave vent to my indignation. He showed no surprise nor did he quicken his pace in the least. He answered:

"What can you expect, sir? It's the custom. They all do it, and it's of no use trying to stop them."

"But at least hurry up!" I cried.

"He answered: 'But I can't go any faster.'"

"He entered the vestry, while we remained outside on the church steps. I was suffering. But what about the poor little creature who was howling from the effects of the biting cold.

"At last the door opened. He went into the church. But the poor child had to remain naked throughout the ceremony. It was interminable. The priest stammered over the Latin words and mispronounced them horribly. He walked slowly and with a ponderous tread. His white surplice chilled my heart. It seemed as though, in the name of a pitiless and barbarous god, he had wrapped himself in another kind of snow in order to torture this little piece of humanity that suffered so from the cold.

"Finally the christening was finished according to the rites and I saw the nurse once more take the frozen, moaning child and wrap it up in the blanket.

"The priest said to me: 'Do you wish to sign the register?'"

"Turning to my gardener, I said: 'Hurry up and get home quickly so that you can warm that child.' I gave him some advice so as to ward off, if not too late, a bad attack of pneumonia. He promised to follow my instructions and left with his sister-in-law and the nurse. I followed the priest into the vestry, and when I had signed he demanded five francs for expenses.

"As I had already given the father ten francs, I refused to pay twice. The priest threatened to destroy the paper and to annul the ceremony. I, in turn, threatened him with the district attorney. The dispute was long, and I finally paid five francs.

"As soon as I reached home I went down to Kerandec's to find out whether everything was all right. Neither father, nor sister-in-law, nor nurse had yet returned. The mother, who had remained alone, was in bed, shivering with cold and starving, for she had had nothing to eat since the day before.

"Where the deuce can they have gone?" I asked. She answered without

surprise or anger, 'They're going to drink something to celebrate: It was the custom. Then I thought, of my ten francs which were to pay the church and would doubtless pay for the alcohol.

"I sent some broth to the mother and ordered a good fire to be built in the room. I was uneasy and furious and promised myself to drive out these brutes, wondering with terror what was going to happen to the poor infant.

"It was already six, and they had not yet returned. I told my servant to wait for them and I went to bed. I soon fell asleep and slept like a top. At daybreak I was awakened by my servant, who was bringing me my hot water.

"As soon as my eyes were open I asked: 'How about Kerandec?'

"The man hesitated and then stammered: 'Oh! he came back, all right, after midnight, and so drunk that he couldn't walk, and so were Kermagan and the nurse. I guess they must have slept in a ditch, for the little one died and they never even noticed it.'

"I jumped up out of bed, crying:

""What! The child is dead?'

""Yes, sir. They brought it back to Mother Kerandec. When she saw it she began to cry, and now they are making her drink to console her.'

""What's that? They are making her drink!'

""Yes, sir. I only found it out this morning. As Kerandec had no more brandy or money, he took some wood alcohol, which monsieur gave him for the lamp, and all four of them are now drinking that. The mother is feeling pretty sick now.'

"I had hastily put on some clothes, and seizing a stick, with the intention of applying it to the backs of these human beasts, I hastened towards the gardener's house.

"The mother was raving drunk beside the blue body of her dead baby. Kerandec, the nurse, and the Kermagan woman were snoring on the floor. I had to take care of the mother, who died towards noon."

The old doctor was silent. He took up the brandy-bottle and poured out another glass. He held it up to the lamp, and the light streaming through it imparted to the liquid the amber color of molten topaz. With one gulp he swallowed the treacherous drink.

Selections (and page images) from the Internet Archive etext of *Advice: A Book of Poems*, by Maxwell Bodenheim

**Foundry Workers
Advice to a Horned Toad
To A Friend
Advice to a Woman
When Fools Dispute
Advice to a Grass-Blade
East-Side: New York
To A Man
The Courtesan Chats
Insanity
Track Workers
Negroes**



Maxwell Bodenheim in 1919

Source: Wikipedia profile of Bodenheim.

FOUNDRY WORKERS

Brown faces twisted back
Into an ecstasy of tight resistance;
Eyes that are huge sweat drops
Unheeded by the struggle underneath them —
Throughout the night you stagger under walls
Where life is squeezed to squealing bitterness.
Beneath your heaving flash of limbs
Your thoughts are smashed to a dejected trance
And you are swept, like empty mites,
Into a glistening frenzy of motion . . .
Yet, on a Sunday afternoon
I have seen you straightening your backs with
 slow smiles;
Walking through the streets
And patiently groping for lost outlines.
Your lips were placid bruises
Almost fearing to relax,
And often out upon some green

Your legs swung themselves into long lost
 shapes.

Perhaps upon your death-beds
You will lift your hands, with a wraith of grace,
Showing life a last, weak curve
Of the rhythm he could not kill.

ADVICE TO A HORNÈD TOAD

Hornèd Toad of cloven brown,
Rock souls have dwindled to your eyes
And thrown a splintered end upon your blood.
Night and day have vanished
To you, who squat and watch
Years loosen one sand grain until
Its fall becomes your moment.
Tall things plunge over you,
Slashing their dreams with motion
That holds the death of all they seek,
But you, to whom fierce winds are ripples,
Do not move lest you lose the taste of stillness.

Hornèd Toad of cloven brown,
Never hop from your grey rock crevice
Mute with interwoven beginnings and ends.
The fluid lies of motion
Leave no remembrance behind.

TO A FRIEND

Your head is steel cut into drooping lines
That make a mask satirically meek:
Your face is like a tired devil weak
From drinking many vague and unsought wines.
The sullen skepticism of your eyes
For ever trying to transcend itself,
Is often entered by a wistful elf
Who sits naïvely unperturbed and wise.

And this same remnant, with its youthful wiles
Held curiously apart from blasphemies,
Twirls starlight shivers out upon your sneers
And changes them to little, startled smiles.
And all your insolence drops to its knees
Before the half-won grandeur of past years.

WHEN FOOLS DISPUTE

A trickle of dawn insinuated itself
Through the crevices of black satiation.
The elderly trees coughed, lightly, hurriedly,
In remonstrance against the invasion.
Lean with a virginal poison,
The grass-blades shook, immune to light and
time.

A bird lost in a tree
Shrilly flirted with its energy . . .
One fool, in the garden, spoke to another.

ADVICE TO A WOMAN

The sloping lines of your shoulders
Speak of Chinese pagodas.
They clash with your western face
Where child and courtesan
Clasp each other in a feigned embrace.
Life, to you, is a liquid mirror.
You stand with delicate, perpetual amazement,
Vainly seeking your reflection.

ADVICE TO A GRASS-BLADE

Thin and dark green symbol
Of an earth forever raising
Myriads of chained wings,
Breezes have a form, to you,
And sounds break into vivid shape.
The proud finality of tiny sight
Cannot lure your pliant blindness.

Thin and dark green blade,
Be not awed by trees and men
Whose sound is all that gives them life.
You reach the sky because your face
Is not turned toward it.

EAST-SIDE: NEW YORK

An old Jew munches an apple,
With conquering immersion
All the thwarted longings of his life
Urge on his determined teeth.
His face is hard and pear-shaped;
His eyes are muddy capitulations;
But his mouth is incongruous.
Softly, slightly distended,
Like that of a whistling girl,
It is ingenuously haunting
And makes the rest of him a soiled, grey back-
ground.
Hopes that lie within their grave
Of submissive sternness,
Have spilled their troubled ghosts upon this
mouth,
And a tortured belief
Has dwindled into tenderness upon it . . .
He trudges off behind his push-cart
And the Ghetto walks away with him.

TO A MAN

Master of earnest equilibrium,
You are a Christ made delicate
By centuries of baffled meditation.
You curve an old myth to a peaceful sword,
Like some sleep-walker challenging
The dream that gave him shape.
With gentle, antique insistence
You place your child's hand on the universe
And trace a smile of love within its depths.
And yet, the whirling scarecrow men have made
Of something that eludes their sight,
May have the startling simplicity of your smile.

Once every thousand years
Stillness fades into a shape
That men may crucify.

THE COURTESAN CHATS

Last night I met a passive man
With almost no curve to his face,
And skin relentlessly white.
He made me tell his fortune
With a pack of cards.

“Jack of hearts — your love will be
A scullion overturning trays of food
And standing dubiously in their midst.”

“Queen of diamonds — you will have a wife
Like a thistle dipped in frost,
Helpless in your sheathed hands.”

“Deuce of clubs — a downcast jester
Will pester you with slanting malice
When you seek to play the king.”

“Ace of hearts — your life will stand
Straight in a desperate majesty,
Its lurid robes ever slipping
And one wound endlessly dripping.”

The passive man blew out a candle
On the table and bade me leave,
Not desiring me to see his face.

INSANITY

Like a vivid hyperbole,
The sun plunged into April's freshness,
And struck its sparkling madness
Against the barnlike dejection
Of this dark red insane asylum.
A softly clutching noise
Stumbled from the open windows.
Now and then obliquely reeling shrieks
Rose, as though from men
To whom death had assumed
An inexpressibly kindly face.
A man stood at one window,
His gaunt face trembling underneath
A feverish jauntiness.
A long white feather slanted back
Upon his almost shapeless hat,
Like an innocent evasion.
Hotly incessant, his voice

Methodically flogged the April air:
A voice that held the clashing bones
Of happiness and fear;
A voice in which emotion
Sharply ridiculed itself;
A monstrously vigorous voice
Mockingly tearing at life
With an unanswerable question.

Hollowed out by his howl,
I turned and saw an asylum guard.
His petulantly flabby face
Rolled into deathlike chips of eyes.
He bore the aimless confidence
Of one contentedly playing with other men's
wings.
He walked away; the man above still shrieked.
I could not separate them.

TRACK-WORKERS

The rails you carry cut into your hands,
Like the sharp lips of an unsought lover.
As you stumble over the ties
Sunlight is clinging, yellow spit
Raining down upon your faces.
You are the living cuspidors of day.
Dirt, its teasing ghost, dust,
And passionless kicks of steel, fill you.
Flowers sprouting near the tracks,
Brush their lightly odoured hands
In vain against your stale jackets of sweat.
Within you, minds and hearts
Are snoring to the curt rhythm of your breath.
You do not see this blustering blackbird
Promenading on a barbed-wire fence.
He eyes you with spritelike hauteur,
Unable to understand
Why your motions endlessly copy each other.

One of you, a meek and burly Pole,
Peers a moment at the strutting blackbird
With a fleeting shade of dull resentment. . . .
There is always one among you
Who recoils from glimpsing corpses.

Then her voice swung in the air
Like a quavering, feverish laugh
Softened in a swaying cradle.

NEGROES

The loose eyes of an old man
Shone aloof upon his boyish face;
And a sluggish innocence
Hugged his dull brown skin.
He sang a hymn caught from his elders
And his voice resembled
A quavering, feverish laugh
Softened in a swaying cradle.
His life had found a refuge in his voice,
And the rest of him was sickly flesh
Ignorant of life and death.
Like a crushed, excited clown
His mother shuffled out upon the porch.
Slowly her dark brown face resolved
Into the hushed and sulky look
Of one who stands within a dim-walled trap.
Lazily uncertain,
She raised the boy into her arms.

THE TWELFTH GUEST.

from the Internet Archive etext of *A New England Nun*, by Mary E. Wilkins

"I don't see how it happened, for my part," Mrs. Childs said. "Paulina, you set the table."

"You counted up yesterday how many there'd be, and you said twelve; don't you know you did, mother? So I didn't count to-day. I just put on the plates," said Paulina, smilingly defensive.

Paulina had something of a helpless and gentle look when she smiled. Her mouth was rather large, and the upper jaw full, so the smile seemed hardly under her control. She was quite pretty; her complexion was so delicate and her eyes so pleasant.

"Well, I don't see how I made such a blunder," her mother remarked further, as she went on pouring the tea.

On the opposite side of the table were a plate, a knife and fork, and a little dish of cranberry sauce, with an empty chair before them. There was no guest to fill it.

"It's a sign somebody's comin' that's hungry," Mrs. Childs' brother's wife said, with soft effusiveness which was out of proportion to the words.

The brother was carving the turkey. Caleb Childs, the host, was an old man, and his hands trembled. Moreover, no one, he himself least of all, ever had any confidence in his ability in such directions. Whenever he helped himself to gravy, his wife watched anxiously lest he should spill it, and he always did. He spilled some to-day. There was a great spot on the beautiful clean table-cloth. Caleb set his cup and saucer over it quickly, with a little clatter because of his unsteady hand. Then he looked at his wife. He hoped she had not seen, but she had.

"You'd better have let John give you the gravy," she said, in a stern aside.

John, rigidly solicitous, bent over the turkey. He carved slowly and laboriously, but everybody had faith in him. The shoulders to which a burden is shifted have the credit of being strong. His wife, in her best black dress, sat smilingly, with her head canted a little to one side. It was

a way she had when visiting. Ordinarily she did not assume it at her sister-in-law's house, but this was an extra occasion. Her fine manners spread their wings involuntarily. When she spoke about the sign, the young woman next to her sniffed.

"I don't take any stock in signs," said she, with a bluntness which seemed to crash through the other's airiness with such force as to almost hurt itself. She was a distant cousin of Mr. Childs. Her husband and three children were with her.

Mrs. Childs' unmarried sister, Maria Stone, made up the eleven at the table. Maria's gaunt face was unhealthily red about the pointed nose and the high cheek-bones; her eyes looked with a steady sharpness through her spectacles.

"Well, it will be time enough to believe the sign when the twelfth one comes," said she, with a summary air. She had a judicial way of speaking. She had taught school ever since she was sixteen, and now she was sixty. She had just given up teaching. It was to celebrate that, and her final home-coming, that her sister was giving a Christmas dinner instead of a Thanksgiving one this year. The school had been in session during Thanksgiving week.

Maria Stone had scarcely spoken when there was a knock on the outer door, which led directly into the room. They all started. They were a plain, unimaginative company, but for some reason a thrill of superstitious and fantastic expectation ran through them. No one arose. They were all silent for a moment, listening and looking at the empty chair in their midst. Then the knock came again.

"Go to the door, Paulina," said her mother.

The young girl looked at her half fearfully, but she rose at once, and went and opened the door. Everybody stretched around to see. A girl stood on the stone step looking into the room. There she stood, and never said a word. Paulina looked around at her mother, with her innocent, half-involuntary smile.

"Ask her what she wants," said Mrs. Childs.

"What do you want?" repeated Paulina, like a sweet echo.

Still the girl said nothing. A gust of north wind swept into the room. John's wife shivered, then looked around to see if any one had noticed it.

"You must speak up quick and tell what you want, so we can shut the door; it's cold," said Mrs. Childs.

The girl's small sharp face was sheathed in an old worsted hood; her eyes glared out of it like a frightened cat's. Suddenly she turned to go. She was evidently abashed by the company.

"Don't you want somethin' to eat?" Mrs. Childs asked, speaking up louder.

"It ain't no matter." She just mumbled it.

"What?"

She would not repeat it. She was quite off the step by this time.

"You make her come in, Paulina," said Maria Stone, suddenly. "She wants something to eat, but she's half scared to death. You talk to her."

"Hadn't you better come in, and have something to eat?" said Paulina, shyly persuasive.

"Tell her she can sit right down here by the stove, where it's warm, and have a good plate of dinner," said Maria.

Paulina fluttered softly down to the stone step. The chilly snow-wind came right in her sweet, rosy face. "You can have a chair by the stove, where it's warm, and a good plate of dinner," said she.

The girl looked at her.

"Won't you come in?" said Paulina, of her own accord, and always smiling.

The stranger made a little hesitating movement forward.

"Bring her in, quick! and shut the door," Maria called out then. And Paulina entered with the girl stealing timidly in her wake.

" Take off your hood an shawl," Mrs. Childs said, " an sit down here by the stove, an I ll give you some dinner." She spoke kindly. She was a warm-hearted woman, but she was rigidly built, and did not relax too quickly into action.

But the cousin, who had been observing, with head alertly raised, interrupted. She cast a mischievous glance at John s wife the empty chair was between them. " For pity s sake !" cried she ; " you ain t goin to shove her off in the corner? Why, here s this chair. She s the twelfth one. Here s where she ought to sit" There was a mixture of heartiness and sport in the young woman s manner. She pulled the chair back from the table. " Come right over here," said she.

There was a slight flutter of consternation among the guests. They were all narrow-lived country people. Their customs had made deeper grooves in their roads ; they were more fastidious and jealous of their social rights than many in higher positions. They eyed this forlorn girl, in her faded and dingy woollens which fluttered airily and showed their pitiful thinness.

Mrs. Childs stood staring at the cousin. She did not think she could be in earnest.

But she was. " Come," said she ; " put some turkey in this plate, John."

" Why, it s jest as the rest of you say," Mrs. Childs said, finally, with hesitation. She looked embarrassed and doubtful.

" Say ! Why, they say just as I do," the cousin went on. "Why shouldn t they? Come right around here." She tapped the chair impatiently.

The girl looked at Mrs. Childs. "You can go an sit down there where she says," she said, slowly, in a constrained tone.

" Come," called the cousin again. And the girl took the empty chair, with the guests all smiling stiffly.

Mrs. Childs began filling a plate for the new-comer.

Now that her hood was removed, one could see her face

more plainly. It was thin, and of that pale brown tint which exposure gives to some blond skins. Still there was a tangible beauty which showed through all that. Her fair hair stood up softly, with a kind of airy roughness which caught the light. She was apparently about sixteen.

"What's your name?" inquired the school-mistress sister, suddenly.

The girl started. "Christine," she said, after a second.

"What?"

"Christine."

A little thrill ran around the table. The company looked at each other. They were none of them conversant with the Christmas legends, but at that moment the universal sentiment of them seemed to seize upon their fancies. The day, the mysterious appearance of the girl, the name, which was strange to their ears all startled them, and gave them a vague sense of the supernatural. They, however, struggled against it with their matter-of-fact pride, and threw it off directly.

"Christine what?" Maria asked further.

The girl kept her scared eyes on Maria's face, but she made no reply.

"What's your other name? Why don't you speak?"

Suddenly she rose.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'd rather go, I guess."

"What are you going for? You ain't had your dinner."

"I can't tell it," whispered the girl.

"Can't tell your name?"

She shook her head.

"Sit down, and eat your dinner," said Maria.

There was a strong sentiment of disapprobation among the company. But when Christine's food was actually before her, and she seemed to settle down upon it, like a bird, they viewed her with more toleration. She was evidently half starved. Their discovery of that fact gave them at once a fellow-feeling toward her on this feast-day, and a complacent sense of their own benevolence.

As the dinner progressed the spirits of the party appeared to rise, and a certain jollity which was almost hilarity prevailed. Beyond providing the strange guest plentifully with food, they seemed to ignore her entirely. Still nothing was more certain than the fact that they did not. Every outburst of merriment was yielded to with the most thorough sense of her presence, which appeared in some subtle way to excite it. It was as if this forlorn twelfth guest were the foreign element needed to produce a state of nervous effervescence in those staid, decorous people who surrounded her. This taste of mystery and unusualness, once fairly admitted, although reluctantly, to their unaccustomed palates, served them as wine with their Christmas dinner.

It was late in the afternoon when they arose from the table. Christine went directly for her hood and shawl, and put them on. The others, talking among themselves, were stealthily observant of her. Christine began opening the door.

"Are you goin home now?" asked Mrs. Childs.

"No, marm."

"Why not?"

"I ain't got any."

"Where did you come from?"

The girl looked at her. Then she unlatched the door.

"Stop!" Mrs. Childs cried, sharply. "What are you goin for? Why don't you answer?"

She stood still, but did not speak.

"Well, shut the door up, an wait a minute," said Mrs.

Childs.

She stood close to a window, and she stared out scrutinizingly. There was no house in sight. First came a great yard, then wide stretches of fields ; a desolate gray road curved around them on the left. The sky was covered with still, low clouds; the sun had not shone out that day. The ground was all bare and rigid. Out in the yard some gray hens were huddled together in little groups for warmth ; their red combs showed out. Two crows flew up, away over on the edge of the field.

" It's goin to snow," said Mrs. Childs.

" I m afeard it is," said Caleb, looking at the girl. He gave a sort of silent sob, and brushed some tears out of his old eyes with the back of his hands.

" See here a minute, Maria," said Mrs. Childs.

The two women whispered together ; then Maria stepped in front of the girl, and stood, tall and stiff and impressive.

" Now, see here," said she ; " we want you to speak up and tell us your other name, and where you came from, and not keep us waiting any longer."

" I can t," They guessed what she said from the motion of her head. She opened the door entirely then and stepped out.

Suddenly Maria made one stride forward and seized her by her shoulders, which felt like knife-blades through the thin clothes. " Well," said she, " we ve been fussing long enough ; we ve got all these dishes to clear away. It s bitter cold, and it s going to snow, and you ain t going out of this house one step to-night, no matter what you are. You d ought to tell us who you are, and it ain t many folks that would keep you if you wouldn t ; but we ain t goin to have you found dead in the road, for our own credit. It ain t on your account. Now you just take those things off again, and go and sit down in that chair."

Christine sat in the chair. Her pointed chin dipped down on her neck, whose poor little muscles showed above her dress, which sagged away from it. She never looked up. The women cleared off the table, and cast curious

glances at her.

After the dishes were washed and put away, the company were all assembled in the sitting-room for an hour or so ; then they went home. The cousin, passing through the kitchen to join her husband, who was waiting with his team at the door, ran hastily up to Christine.

" You stop at my house when you go to-morrow morning," said she. " Mrs. Childs will tell you where tis half a mile below here."

When the company were all gone, Mrs. Childs called Christine into the sitting-room. "You d better come in here and sit now," said she. " I m goin to let the kitchen fire go down; I ain t goin to get another regular meal; I m jest goin to make a cup of tea on the sittin -room stove by-an -by."

The sitting-room was warm, and restrainedly comfortable with its ordinary village furnishings its ingrain carpet, its little peaked clock on a corner of the high black shelf, its red-covered card-table, which had stood in the same spot for forty years. There was a little newspaper-covered stand, with some plants on it, before a window. There was one red geranium in blossom.

Paulina was going out that evening. Soon after the company went she commenced to get ready, and her mother and aunt seemed to be helping her. Christine was alone in the sitting-room for the greater part of an hour.

Finally the three women came in, and Paulina stood before the sitting-room glass for a last look at herself. She had on her best red cashmere, with some white lace around her throat. She had a red geranium flower with some leaves in her hair. Paulina s brown hair, which was rather thin, was very silky. It was apt to part into little soft strands on her forehead. She wore it brushed smoothly back. Her mother would not allow her to curl it.

The two older women stood looking at her. " Don t you think she looks nice, Christine ?" Mrs. Childs asked, in a sudden overflow of love and pride, which led her to ask sympathy from even this forlorn source.

" Yes, marm." Christine regarded Paulina, in her red cashmere and geranium flower, with sharp, solemn eyes.

When she really looked at any one, her gaze was as unflinching as that of a child.

There was a sudden roll of wheels in the yard.

"Willard's come!" said Mrs. Childs. "Run to the door and tell him you'll be right out, Paulina, and I'll get your things ready."

After Paulina had been helped into her coat and hood, and the wheels had bowled out of the yard with a quick dash, the mother turned to Christine.

"My daughter's gone to a Christmas tree over to the church," said she. "That was Willard Morris that came for her. He's a real nice young man that lives about a mile from here."

Mrs. Childs' tone was at once gently patronizing and elated.

When Christine was shown to a little back bedroom that night, nobody dreamed how many times she was to occupy it. Maria and Mrs. Childs, who after the door was closed set a table against it softly and erected a tiltish pyramid of milkpans, to serve as an alarm signal in case the strange guest should try to leave her room with evil intentions, were fully convinced that she would depart early on the following morning.

"I dun know but I've run an awful risk keeping her," Mrs. Childs said. "I don't like her not tellin' where she come from. Nobody knows but she belongs to a gang of burglars, and they've kind of sent her on ahead to spy out things and unlock the doors for 'em."

"I know it," said Maria. "I wouldn't have had her stay for a thousand dollars if it hadn't looked so much like snow. Well, I'll get up and start her off early in the morning."

But Maria Stone could not carry out this resolution. The next morning she was ill with a sudden and severe attack of erysipelas. Moreover, there was a hard snow-storm, the worst of the season; it would have been barbarous to have turned the girl out-of-doors on such a morning. Moreover, she developed an unexpected capacity for usefulness. She assisted Pauline about the housework with timid alacrity, and Mrs. Childs could devote all her time to her sister.

" She takes right hold as if she was used to it," she told Maria. " I d rather keep her a while than not, if I only knew a little more about her."

" I don t believe but what I could get it out of her after a while if I tried," said Maria, with her magisterial air, which illness could not subdue.

However, even Maria, with all her well-fostered imperiousness, had no effect on the girl s resolution ; she continued as much of a mystery as ever. Still the days went on, then the weeks and months, and she remained in the Childs family.

None of them could tell exactly how it had been brought about. The most definite course seemed to be that her arrival had apparently been the signal for a general decline of health in the family. Maria had hardly recovered when Caleb Childs was laid up with the rheumatism ; then Mrs. Childs had a long spell of exhaustion from overwork in nursing. Christine proved exceedingly useful in these emergencies. Their need of her appeared to be the dominant, and only outwardly evident, reason for her stay ; still there was a deeper one which they themselves only faintly realized this poor young girl, who was rendered almost repulsive to these honest downright folk by her persistent cloak of mystery, had somehow, in a very short time, melted herself, as it were, into their own lives. Christine asleep of a night in her little back bedroom, Christine of a day stepping about the house in one of Paulina s old gowns, became a part of their existence, and a part which was not far from the nature of a sweetness to their senses.

She still retained her mild shyness of manner, and rarely spoke unless spoken to. Now that she was warmly sheltered and well fed, her beauty became evident. She grew prettier every day. Her cheeks became softly dimpled ; her hair turned golden. Her language was rude and illiterate, but its very uncouthness had about it something of a soft grace.

She was really prettier than Paulina.

The two young girls were much together, but could hardly be said to be intimate. There were few confidences between them, and confidences are essential for the intimacy of young girls.

Willard Morris came regularly twice a week to see Paulina, and everybody spoke of them as engaged to each other. Along in August Mrs. Childs drove over to town one afternoon and bought a piece of cotton cloth and a little embroidery and lace. Then some fine sewing went on, but with no comment in the household. Mrs. Childs had simply said, "I guess we may as well get a few things made up for you, Paulina, you're getting rather short." And Paulina had sewed all day long, with a gentle industry, when the work was ready.

There was a report that the marriage was to take place on Thanksgiving Day. But about the first of October Willard Morris stopped going to the Childs house. There was no explanation. He simply did not come as usual on Sunday night, nor the following Wednesday, nor the next Sunday. Paulina kindled her little parlor fire, whose sticks she had laid with maiden preciseness; she arrayed herself in her best gown and ribbons. When at nine o'clock Willard had not come, she blew out the parlor lamp, shut up the parlor stove, and went to bed. Nothing was said before her, but there was much talk and surmise between Mrs. Childs and Maria, and a good deal of it went on before Christine.

It was a little while after the affair of Cyrus Morris's note, and they wondered if it could have anything to do with that. Cyrus Morris was Willard's uncle, and the note affair had occasioned much distress in the Childs family for a month back. The note was for twenty-five hundred dollars, and Cyrus Morris had given it to Caleb Childs. The time, which was two years, had expired on the first of September, and then Caleb could not find the note.

He had kept it in his old-fashioned desk, which stood in one corner of the kitchen. He searched there a day and half a night, pulling all the soiled, creasy old papers out of the drawers and pigeon-holes before he would answer his wife's inquiries as to what he had lost.

Finally he broke down and told. "I've lost that note of Morris's," said he. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

He stood looking gloomily at the desk with its piles of papers. His rough old chin dropped down on his breast.

The women were all in the kitchen, and they stopped

and stared.

"Why, father," said his wife, "where have you put it?"

"I put it here in this top drawer, and it ain't there."

"Let me look," said Maria, in a confident tone. But even Maria's energetic and self-assured researches failed.

"Well, it ain't here," said she. "I don't know what you've done with it."

"I don't believe you put it in that drawer, father," said his wife.

"It was in there two weeks ago. I see it."

"Then you took it out afterwards."

"I ain't laid hands on it."

"You must have; it couldn't have gone off without hands. You know you're kind of forgetful, father."

"I guess I know when I've took a paper out of a drawer. I know a leetle somethin' yit."

"Well, I don't suppose there'll be any trouble about it, will there?" said Mrs. Childs. "Of course he knows he gave the note, and had the money."

"I dun know as there'll be any trouble, but I'd rather give a hundred dollar than had it happen."

After dinner Caleb shaved, put on his other coat and hat, and trudged soberly up the road to Cyrus Morris's. Cyrus Morris was an elderly man, who had quite a local reputation for wealth and business shrewdness. Caleb, who was lowly-natured and easily impressed by another's importance, always made a call upon him quite a formal affair, and shaved and dressed up.

He was absent about an hour to-day. When he returned he went into the sitting-room, where the women sat with their sewing. He dropped into a chair, and looked straight ahead, with his forehead knitted.

The women dropped their work and looked at him, and then at each other.

"What did he say, father?" Mrs. Childs asked at length.

"Say! He's a rascal, that's what he is, and I'll tell him so, too."

"Ain't he goin' to pay it?"

"No, he ain't."

"Why, father, I don't believe it! You didn't get hold of it straight," said his wife.

"You'll see."

"Why, what did he say?"

"He didn't say anything."

"Doesn't he remember he had the money and gave the note, and has been paying interest on it?" queried Maria.

"He jest laughed, and said twa n't accordin' to law to pay unless I showed the note and give it up to him. He said he couldn't be sure but I'd want him to pay it over again. I know where that note is /"

Caleb's voice had deep meaning in it. The women stared at him.

"Where?"

"In Cyrus Morris's desk that's where it is"

"Why, father, you're crazy!"

"No, I ain't crazy, nuther. I know what I'm talkin' about. I"

"It's just where you put it," interrupted Maria, taking up her sewing with a switch; "and I wouldn't lay the blame onto anybody else."

"You'd ought to have looked out for a paper like that," said his wife. "I guess I should if it had been me. If you've gone and lost all that money through your carelessness, you've done it, that's all I've got to say. I don't see what we're goin' to do."

Caleb bent forward and fixed his eyes upon the women. He held up his shaking hand impressively, "You'll stop talkin' just a minute," said he, "I'll tell you what I was goin' to. Now I'd like to know just one thing: Wdrit Cyrus Morris alone in that kitchen as much as fifteen minutes a week ago to-day? Didrit you leave him there while you went to look arter me? Wa*nt the key in the desk? Answer me thatT

His wife looked at him with cold surprise and severity. "I wouldn't talk in any such way as that if I was you, father," said she. "It don't show a Christian spirit. It's jest layin' the blame of your own carelessness onto some body else. You're all the one that's to blame. And when it comes to it, you'd never ought to let Cyrus Morris have the money anyhow. I could have told you better. I knew what kind of a man he was."

"He's a rascal," said Caleb, catching eagerly at the first note of foreign condemnation in his wife's words. "He'd ought to be put in state's-prison. I don't think much of his relations nuther. I don't want nothin' to do with em, and I don't want none of my folks to."

Paulina's soft cheeks flushed. Then she suddenly spoke out as she had never spoken in her life.

"It doesn't make it out because he's a bad man that his relations are," said she. "You haven't any right to speak so, father. And I guess you won't stop me having any thing to do with them, if you want to."

She was all pink and trembling. Suddenly she burst out crying, and ran out of the room.

"You'd ought to be ashamed of yourself, father," exclaimed Mrs. Childs.

"I didn't think of her takin' on it so," muttered Caleb, humbly. "I didn't mean nothin'."

Caleb did not seem like himself through the following days. His simple old face took on an expression of strained thought, which made it look strange. He was tottering on a height of mental effort and worry which was almost above the breathing capacity of his innocent and placid nature. Many a night he rose, lighted a candle, and tremulously

fumbled over his desk until morning, in the vain hope of finding the missing note.

One night, while he was so searching, some one touched him softly on the arm.

He jumped and turned. It was Christine. She had stolen in silently.

"Oh, it s you!" said he.

" Ain t you found it ?"

" Found it ? No ; an I sha n t, nuther." He turned away from her and pulled out another drawer. The girl stood watching him wistfully. "It was a big yellow paper," the old man went on "a big yellow paper, an I d wrote on the back on t, Cyrus Morris s note. An the interest he d paid was set down on the back on t, too."

" It s too bad you can t find it," said she.

" It ain t no use lookin ; it ain t here, an that s the hull on t. It s in his desk. I ain t got no more doubt on t than nothin at all."

"Where does he keep his desk?"

" In his kitchen ; it s jest like this one."

"Would this key open it?"

" I dun know but twould. But it ain t no use. I s pose I ll have to lose it." Caleb sobbed silently and wiped his eyes.

A few days later he came, all breathless, into the sitting-room. He could hardly speak ; but he held out a folded yellow paper, which fluttered and blew in his unsteady hand like a yellow maple-leaf in an autumn gale.

" Look-a-here !" he gasped" look-a-here !"

" Why, for goodness sake, what s the matter ?" cried Maria. She and Mrs. Childs and Paulina were there, sewing peacefully.

"Jest look-a-here!"

" Why, for mercy s sake, what is it, father ? Are you crazy ?"

"It s the noteT

" What note ? Don t get so excited, father."

" Cyrus Morris s note. That s what note tis. Look-a-
here !"

The women all arose and pressed around him, to look at it.

" Where did you find it, father ?" asked his wife, who was quite pale.

" I suppose it was just where you put it," broke in Ma
ria, with sarcastic emphasis.

" No, it wa n t. No, it wa n t, nuther. Don t you go
to crowin too quick, Maria. That paper was just where
I told you twas. What do you think of that, hey ?"

" Oh, father, you didn t !"

" It was layin right there in his desk. That s where
twas. Jest where I knew "

"Father, you didn t go over there an take it!"

The three women stared at him with dilated eyes.

" No, I didn t."

"Who did?"

The old man jerked his head towards the kitchen door.

" She."

" Who ?"

" Christiny."

" How did she get it ?" asked Maria, in her magisterial
manner, which no astonishment could agitate.

" She saw Cyrus and Mis Morris ride past, an then
she run over there, an she got in through the window

an got it; that s how." Caleb braced himself like a stubborn child, in case any exception were taken to it all.

"It beats everything I ever heard," said Mrs. Childs, faintly.

" Next time you ll believe what I tell you !" said Caleb.

The whole family were in a state of delight over the recovery of the note ; still Christine got rather hesitating gratitude. She was sharply questioned, and rather reproved than otherwise.

This theft, which could hardly be called a theft, aroused the old distrust of her.

" It served him just right, and it wasn t stealing, because it didn t belong to him ; and I don t know what you would have done if she hadn t taken it," said Maria ; " but, for all that, it went all over me."

" So it did over me," said her sister. " I felt just as you did, and I felt as if it was real ungrateful too, when the poor child did it just for us."

But there were no such misgivings for poor Caleb, with his money, and his triumph over iniquitous Cyrus Morris. He was wholly and unquestioningly grateful.

" It was a blessed day when we took that little girl in," he told his wife.

" I hope it'll prove so," said she.

Paulina took her lover s desertion quietly. She had just as many soft smiles for every one ; there was no alteration in her gentle, obliging ways. Still her mother used to listen at her door, and she knew that she cried instead of sleeping many a night. She was not able to eat much, either, although she tried to with pleasant willingness when her mother urged her.

After a while she was plainly grown thin, and her pretty color had faded. Her mother could not keep her eyes from her.

" Sometimes I think I ll go and ask Willard myself what

this kind of work means," she broke out with an abashed abruptness one afternoon. She and Paulina happened to be alone in the sitting-room.

"You'll kill me if you do, mother," said Paulina. Then she began to cry.

"Well, I won't do anything you don't want me to, of course," said her mother. She pretended not to see that Paulina was crying.

Willard had stopped coming about the first of October; the time wore on until it was the first of December, and he had not once been to the house, and Paulina had not exchanged a word with him in the meantime.

One night she had a fainting-spell. She fell heavily while crossing the sitting-room floor. They got her on to the lounge, and she soon revived; but her mother had lost all control of herself. She came out into the kitchen and paced the floor.

"Oh, my darlin'" she wailed. "She's goin' to die. What shall I do? All the child I've got in the world. An he's killed her! That scamp! I wish I could get my hands on him. Oh, Paulina, Paulina, to think it should come to this!"

Christine was in the room, and she listened with eyes dilated and lips parted. She was afraid that shrill wail would reach Paulina in the next room.

"She'll hear you," she said, finally.

Mrs. Childs grew quieter at that, and presently Maria called her into the sitting-room.

Christine stood thinking for a moment. Then she got her hood and shawl, put on her rubbers, and went out. She shut the door softly, so nobody should hear. When she stepped forth she plunged knee-deep into snow. It was snowing hard, as it had been all day. It was a cold storm, too; the wind was bitter. Christine waded out of the yard and down the street. She was so small and light that she staggered when she tried to step firmly in some tracks ahead of her. There was a full moon behind the clouds, and there was a soft white light in spite of the storm.

Christine kept on down the street, in the direction of Willard Morris's house. It was a mile distant. Once in a while she stopped and turned herself about, that the terrible wind might smite her back instead of her face. When she reached the house she waded painfully through the yard to the side-door and knocked. Pretty soon it opened, and Willard stood there in the entry, with a lamp in his hand.

" Good-evening," said he, doubtfully, peering out.

" Good-evenin'," The light shone on Christine's face. The snow clung to her soft hair, so it was quite white. Her cheeks had a deep, soft color, like roses ; her blue eyes blinked a little in the lamp-light, but seemed rather to flicker like jewels or stars. She panted softly through her parted lips. She stood there, with the snow-flakes driving in light past her, and " She looks like an angel," came swiftly into Willard Morris's head before he spoke.

" Oh, it's you," said he.

Christine nodded.

Then they stood waiting. " Why, won't you come in ?" said Willard, finally, with an awkward blush. " I declare I never thought. I ain't very polite."

She shook her head. " No, thank you," said she.

" Did you want to see mother ?"

" No."

The young man stared at her in increasing perplexity. His own fair, handsome young face got more and more flushed. His forehead wrinkled. " Was there anything you wanted ?"

" No, I guess not," Christine replied, with a slowness.

Willard shifted the lamp into his other hand and sighed. " It's a pretty hard storm," he remarked, with an air of forced patience.

"Yes."

" Didn t you find it terrible hard walking ?"

"Some."

Willard was silent again. " See here, they re all well down at your house, ain t they?" said he, finally. A look of anxious interest had sprung into his eyes. He had be gun to take alarm.

"I guess so."

Suddenly he spoke out impetuously. " Say, Christine, I don t know what you came here for ; you can tell me af terwards. I don t know what you ll think of me, but Well, I want to know something. Say well, I haven t been round for quite a while. You don t suppose they ve cared much, any of them ?"

" I don t know."

"Well, I don t suppose you do, but you might have noticed. Say, Christine, you don t think she you know whom I mean cared anything about my coming, do you?"

" I don t know," she said again, softly, with her eyes fixed warily on his face.

" Well, I guess she didn t ; she wouldn t have said what she did if she had."

Christine s eyes gave a sudden gleam. "What did she say?"

" Said she wouldn t have anything more to do with me," said the young man, bitterly. " She was afraid I would be up to just such tricks as my uncle was, trying to cheat her father. That was too much for me. I wasn t going to stand that from any girl." He shook his head angrily.

" She didn t say it."

" Yes, she did ; her own father told my uncle so. Mother was in the next room and heard it."

" No, she didn t say it," the girl repeated.

" How do you know?"

" I heard her say something different." Christine told him.

" I m going right up there," cried he, when he heard that. " Wait a minute, and I ll go along with you."

" I dun know as you d better to-night," Christine said, looking out towards the road, evasively. " She ain t been very well to-night."

" Who ? Paulina ? What s the matter ?"

" She had a faintin -spell jest before I came out," answered Christine, with stiff gravity.

" Oh ! Is she real sick ?"

" She was some better."

" Don t you suppose I could see her just a few minutes ? I wouldn t stay to tire her," said the young man, eagerly.

"I dun know."

" I must, anyhow."

Christine fixed her eyes on his with a solemn sharpness. " What makes you want to?"

"What makes me want to? Why, I d give ten years to see her five minutes."

" Well, mebbe you could come over a few minutes."

"Wait a minute," cried Villard. " I ll get my hat."

" I d better go first, I guess. The parlor fire ll be to light."

" Then had I better wait ?"

" I guess so."

"Then I ll be along in about an hour. Say, you haven t said what you wanted."

Christine was off the step. " It ain t any matter," murmured she.

" Say she didn t send you?"

" No, she didn t."

" I didn t mean that. I didn t suppose she did," said Willard, with an abashed air. " What did you want, Christine?"

"There s somethin I want you to promise," said she, suddenly.

"What s that?"

" Don t you say anything about Mr. Childs."

" Why, how can I help it ?"

* He s an old man, an he was so worked up he didn t know what he was sayin . They ll all scold him. Don t say anything."

" Well, I won t say anything. I don t know what I m going to tell her, though."

Christine turned to go.

" You didn t say what twas you wanted," called Willard again.

But she made no reply. She was pushing through the deep snow out of the yard.

It was quite early yet, only a few minutes after seven. It was eight when she reached home. She entered the house without any one seeing her. She pulled off her snowy things, and went into the sitting-room.

Paulina was alone there. She was lying on the lounge. She was very pale, but she looked up and smiled when Christine entered.

Christine brought the fresh out-door air with her. Paulina noticed it. " Where have you been ?" whispered she.

Then Christine bent over her, and talked fast in a low tone.

Presently Paulina raised herself and sat up. " To-night ?" cried she, in an eager whisper. Her cheeks grew red.

" Yes ; I ll go make the parlor fire."

" It s all ready to light." Suddenly Paulina threw her arms around Christine and kissed her. Both girls blushed.

" I don t think I said one thing to him that you wouldn t have wanted me to," said Christine.

" You didn t ask him to come ?"

" No, I didn t, honest."

When Mrs. Childs entered, a few minutes later, she found her daughter standing before the glass.

" Why, Paulina !" cried she.

" I feel a good deal better, mother," said Paulina.

" Ain t you goin to bed ?"

" I guess I won t quite yet."

" I ve got it all ready for you. I thought you wouldn t feel like sittin up."

" I guess I will ; a little while."

Soon the door-bell rang with a sharp peal. Everybody jumped Paulina rose and went to the door.

Mrs. Childs and Maria, listening, heard Willard s familiar voice, then the opening of the parlor door.

" It s him !" gasped Mrs. Childs. She and Maria looked at each other.

It was about two hours before the soft murmur of voices in the parlor ceased, the outer door closed with a thud, and Paulina came into the room. She was blushing and smiling, but she could not look in any one s face at first.

" Well," said her mother, "who was it?"

"Willard. It s all right."

It was not long before the fine sewing was brought out again, and presently two silk dresses were bought for Paulina. It was known about that she was to be married on Christmas Day. Christine assisted in the preparation. All the family called to mind afterwards the obedience so ready as to be loving which she yielded to their biddings during those few hurried weeks. She sewed, she made cake, she ran of errands, she weaned herself joyfully for the happiness of this other young girl.

About a week before the wedding, Christine, saying good-night when about to retire one evening, behaved strangely. They remembered it afterwards. She went up to Paulina and kissed her when saying good-night. It was something which she had never before done. Then she stood in the door, looking at them all. There was a sad, almost a solemn, expression on her fair girlish face.

"Why, what's the matter?" said Maria.

"Nothin'," said Christine. "Good-night."

That was the last time they ever saw her. The next morning Mrs. Childs, going to call her, found her room vacant. There was a great alarm. When they did not find her in the house nor the neighborhood, people were aroused, and there was a search instigated. It was prosecuted eagerly, but to no purpose. Paulina's wedding evening came, and Christine was still missing.

Paulina had been married, and was standing beside her husband, in the midst of the chattering guests, when Caleb stole out of the room. He opened the north door, and stood looking out over the dusky fields. "Christiny!" he called, "Christiny!"

Presently he looked up at the deep sky, full of stars, and called again "Christiny! Christiny!" But there was no answer save in light. When Christine stood in the sitting-room door and said good-night, her friends had their last sight and sound of her. Their Twelfth Guest had departed from their hospitality forever.

The Project Gutenberg etext of
PICTURE BRIDE
By William Morrison

*As pretty as a picture? Yes, because that was
all she was ... or would become some day!*

My brother, Perry, always was a bit cracked. As a kid, he almost blew up our house doing experiments. When he was eighteen, he wrote poetry, but fortunately that didn't last long and he went back to science.

Now, when he showed me this picture, I figured he'd had a relapse of some kind. "This is the girl I'm in love with," he said.

She wasn't bad. Not bad at all, even if her clothes were crazy. She wasn't my type--too brainy-looking--although I could see how some guys would go for her. "I thought you liked blondes."

"I wouldn't give you two cents for all the blondes in Hollywood," he answered. "This is the only girl for me."

"You sound as if you've got it bad," I said. "You going to marry her?"

His face dropped about a mile. "I can't."

"You mean she's married already?" I was surprised. This wasn't like Perry at all.

He sort of hesitated, as if he was afraid of saying too much. "No, she isn't married. I asked her about that. But I can't marry her because--well, I've never met her. All I've seen of her is this picture and a few more. She doesn't live here."

"You mean she's in Europe?" I've heard of these love affairs by mail, and they never made much sense to me. I said to Perry, "Why can't she come to this country?"

"Oh, there are a lot of things in the way."

It sounded worse and worse. I said, "Look, Perry, this smells like a racket to me. It's the kind of thing a couple of shrewd operators cook up to take some hick for a ride. I'm surprised at you falling for it. How do you know there really is a dame like that in Europe? Anybody can send pictures----"

"You've got it all wrong," he said. "I've spoken to her."

"By phone? How do you know who's on the other end? You hear a dame's voice you never heard before. What makes you think it's hers?"

Again he didn't seem to want to talk, as if he had some secret to hide. But I guess he felt like getting things off his chest, too, or he wouldn't have opened up in the first place. And he had already told me enough so that if he didn't tell me more he'd sound like a dope.

So after hesitating even longer than before, he said, "Let's get this straight, George. This is no racket. I've seen and talked to her at the same time. And the things she talked about, no con man would know."

"You've seen and talked to her at the same time? You mean by TV? I don't believe it. They can't send TV to Europe."

"I didn't say it was TV. And I didn't say she lived in Europe."

"That's exactly what you did say. Or maybe you meant she lived on Mars?"

"No. She's an American."

"This makes less and less sense to me. Where did you meet her?"

He turned red, and squirmed all over the place. Finally he said, "Right here in my own laboratory."

"In your own laboratory! But you said you never met her in the flesh!"

"I didn't. Not really by TV either. The fact is--she isn't born yet."

I backed away from him. When he was a kid and blew up our kitchen, I didn't like it. When he wrote poetry, I was kind of ashamed and didn't want my pals to know he was my brother. Now, I was really scared. Everything he had been saying in the last ten minutes began to make sense, but a screwy kind of sense.

He saw how I felt. "Don't worry, George, I haven't gone crazy. Her time is 2973, more than a thousand years from now. The only way I've seen and talked to her is on a time-contact machine."

"Come again?"

"A kind of time machine. It can't send material objects back and forth across time, as far as I know, but it can send certain waves, especially the kind we use to transmit signals. That's how she and I could talk to each other and see each other."

"Perry, I think you ought to see a good doctor."

"It's a remarkable device," he said, paying no attention to how I was trying to help him. "She's the one who first constructed it and contacted me. It's based on an extension of Einstein's equations----"

"You think you can explain so much," I said. "Okay, then, explain this. This dame isn't going to be born for a thousand years. And yet you tell me you're in love with her. What's the difference between you and somebody that's nuts?" I asked, as if anybody knew the answer.

He certainly didn't. In fact, he went ahead and proved to me that they were the same thing. Because for the next couple of weeks, the only thing he'd talk about, outside of equations I couldn't understand, was this dame. How smart she was, and how beautiful she was, and how wonderful she was in every way that a dame can be wonderful, and how she loved him. For a time he had me convinced that she actually existed.

"Compared with you," I said, "Romeo had a mild case."

"There are some quantities so great that you can't measure them," he said. "That will give you some idea of our love for each other."

There it went, the old poetry, cropping out in him just like before. And all the time I'd been thinking it was like measles, something that you get once and it builds up your resistance so you don't get it again, at least not bad. It just goes to show how wrong I could be.

"What preacher are you going to get to marry you?" I asked. "A guy born five hundred years from now?"

"I don't think that's funny," he said.

"You're telling me. Look, Perry, you're smart enough to know what I'm thinking----"

"You still think I'm crazy."

"I got an open mind on the subject. Now, if you won't see a doctor--then how about letting me take a look at this dame, so I can convince myself?"

"No," he said. "I've considered doing that, and decided against it. Her voice and image come through for only about five minutes a day, sometimes less. And those minutes are very precious to us. We don't want any one else present, any one at all."

"Not even to convince me she actually exists?"

"You wouldn't be convinced anyway," he said very shrewdly. "No matter what I showed you, you'd still find a reason to call it a fraud."

He was right at that. It would take a lot of convincing to make me believe that a babe who wasn't going to get born for a thousand years was in love with him.

By this time, though, I was sure of one thing--there was something screwy going on in that laboratory of his. For five minutes a day he was watching some dame's picture, listening to her voice. If I had an idea what she was like, I might figure out where to go from there.

I began keeping an eye on Perry, dropping in at the laboratory to pay him visits. There was what looked like a ten-inch TV tube in one corner of his place, not housed in a cabinet, but lying on the table among dozens of other tubes and rheostats and meters and other things I didn't know about. Along the wall that led from this corner was a lot of stuff which Perry said was high voltage, and warned me not to touch.

I kept away. I wasn't trying to figure out how to get myself killed. All I wanted to know was when he saw this girl.

Finally I managed to pin the time down to between three and four in the afternoon. For five minutes every day, during that hour, he locked the door and didn't answer phone calls. I figured that if I dropped in then I might get a glimpse of her.

And that's what I did.

At first, when I knocked on the door, there was no answer. In a minute, though, I heard Perry's voice, but he wasn't talking to me. He was saying, "Darling," and he sounded kind of sick, which I figured was due to love. Come to think of it, he might have been scared a little. I heard him say, "Don't be afraid," and it was quiet for about fifteen seconds.

Then I heard a terrific crash, like lightning striking. The door shook, and I smelled something sharp, and the first thing I wanted to do was get out of that place. But I couldn't leave my brother in there.

I put my shoulder to the door and had no trouble at all. The explosion, or whatever it was, must have weakened the hinges. As the door crashed in, I looked for Perry.

There was no sign of him. But I could see his shoes, on the floor in front of that TV tube, where he must have been standing. No feet in them, though, just his socks. All the high-voltage stuff was smoking.

The TV screen was all lit up, and on it I could see a girl's face, the same girl whose picture Perry had shown me. She was wearing one of those funny costumes, and she looked scared. It was a clear picture, and I could even see the way she gulped.

Then she broke out into a happy smile and, for about half a second, before the second explosion, I could see Perry on the screen. After that second explosion--even though it wasn't near as big as the first--that TV set was nothing but a mess of twisted junk, and there was no screen left to see anything on.

Perry liked to have everything just so, and he'd never think of going anyplace without his tie being knotted just right, and his socks matching, and so on. And here he'd traveled a thousand years into the future in bare feet. I felt kind of embarrassed for him.

Anyway, they were engaged, and now they must be married, so I guess she had slippers waiting for him. I'm just sorry I missed the wedding.



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